

RELIGIO-POLITICAL SENTIMENTS IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY: A THREAT TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

In Nigeria, like some other countries in the world, religion and politics play a reasonable role to their national and economic development. In Africa, generally, religion appears to take possession of every sphere of their lives. African culture is strongly built on African Religion world view. Before the advent of Western and Arabian education, civilization and religions, the political aspect of the people's life is consolidated on traditional religion. As the foreigners arrived, the system changed, various religious and political orientations grew, but then, families of mixed ethnic groups in the country have established serious friendly tiers. In a case where such families alien to the same or different political or religious attachment they protect the interest of one another based on inter-personal age long friendly sentiment, using religion and political organizations they belong as a vehicle that will convey the sentimental and selfish interest they have. This paper therefore, aims at addressing relationship as a basic factor that propels religious and political sentiments, which influences national development. Finally, it recommends for a re-orientation among Nigerians that national interest should not revolve within selected few families, etc. The research employs phenomenological approach, descriptive style of data analysis was used. Data were generated from secondary source.

Key words: Religion and political sentiments, National Development.

Introduction

No state or country is devoid of religio-political sentiments, so, Nigerian Society cannot be an exception. Religio-political sentiments are often found at the heart of every political competition. With all social cleavages, fault lines within societies form along these sentiments, therefore creating opposing interests. These differences of interests, in turn, offer themselves to potential or occasional violence and conflicts. This is not to say that expressions of religio-political sentiments always result in violence; such desires and demands are usually channeled peacefully through political institutions, just like other clashes of interests within the polity. But in Nigeria, consequences of religio-political sentiments are so alarming and unbecoming. The paper therefore, discovers that religio-political sentiments which are propelled by relationship are contributory factors that have given rise to incessant assassination, kidnapping, thugs, vote buying, industrial actions, lost of lives and properties, etc. are serious problems that should be addressed. This paper intends to find out how religio-political sentiments in Nigerian society is a big threat to National development. According to Jega (2002:35) political power can be said to be like a seed, essentially, what you sow, you reap in abundance. In Nigeria, since the transition of power from the military to civilians on 29th May, 1999 there have been a rising religious and political conflicts with devastating consequences on lives and properties. The political leaders of Nigeria are like men driving lorries which has lost its breaks and steering wheels. Conflicts, violence and associated tensions have remained high, with all the attendant, negative consequences on the socio-economic and political development of the country.

The actual roles which religion plays in politics and the sentiments which are attached to it have remained debatable, the nexus between these two concepts has been established for long. It appears that Nigerians have resigned themselves to fate and this is further compounded by poverty, illiteracy and lack of political education on the part of the majority. This situation is further aggravated by the general perception that politics is a dirty game, which only people who can deceive, manipulate and greedily accumulate wealth are meant to participate (Egbewole and Etudauje, 2011). The number of religious people in Nigeria run into millions, yet the level of embezzlement, insecurity, fraudulent acts, destruction of lives and properties, also crimes committed in God's name are overwhelming. There is a common fallacy which states that religion and politics are two different fields of social activity but are considered inseparable. In Nigerian society, religion plays an important role in the daily lives of her citizens, the way we interact with one another, our choice of dressing and food. Politics on the other hand, is affected by religion. Religion and politics are intertwined and this empowers man to function in his society by contesting for a political position so as to contribute his ideas. It is the objective of this paper also to add to the existing literature and to introduce other measures by which the negative effects of these sentiments would be controlled to the barest

minimum. It also discovers that the religio-political sentiments are not only for economic benefit or infrastructural advantage but also built on ethnic, denominational ego, and age long friendly relationship void of religion or political alliance but religion and political affiliation most of the time are misunderstood to be the bone of contention. Part of its objective is also to address relationship as a major factor that triggers religio-political sentiments. It is the conviction of this paper that when these control measures are implemented, it will make the political and religious scene relatively stable, foster economic growth and national development, save lives among other things. The research adopted phenomenological method. Data were collected from secondary sources. Data were analysed with descriptive style of data analysis.

Concept of Religion, Politics and Society

Religion, politics and society are concepts which have been subjected to different definitions from various scholars. There seems to be no straight definitions of these concepts. Religion is a belief system which uses symbols to allow people explore their spirituality. Religion depends on symbols and narratives usually employed to offer meaning to human existence and also explain the indices for creation of the universe (Adamu, 2006: 17). Virtually, every religion has ethical foundations indicating how their adherents should behave in the society. This must have led Oluniyi to observe that religion is a source of individual and societal peace” (Oluniyi, 2006:1). Religious beliefs are evident in religious dogma, creed, conviction, doctrine and principles (Ayantayo, 2009). Religious practices encompass different religious activities such as worship, fellowship, communion, prayer, offering and almsgiving. Adesina (2005:7) states that; “religious ethics are the moral principles which guide religions and set the standard for what is and what isn’t acceptable behaviours”. The basic requirement is that religion, being a belief system must be held by a group of people who publicly share its doctrine.

Politics is a game of who gets what, when and how. When applied to Nigerian political experience, one can submit that the politicians have been using various means including religion to hold on to power. Politics has therefore been used for the promotion of self-aggrandizement in the name of who gets what, when and how? Dell (2002:8) sees politics as “... having to do with efficient organization and judicious administration of the collective affairs of the organised human community”. This was the conception of ancient philosophers such as Plato (470:399 BC). These early views emphasized what politics ought to be rather than what it actually is. Olateye (2008:35) sees politics as “a science or act of the management of public affairs”. In Nigerian society, some breed of people called politicians have emerged, who claim to have the necessary qualification for the efficient management of public affairs. These politicians, naturally formed themselves into groups called parties, each

with different ideas of its own and divergent methods of realizing those ideas. Kolawole (1998:25) holds the view that “in a democratic society, citizens entrust their representatives with the management of affairs by voting in candidates of their political choice”. This therefore connotes that, for national integration and development to be attained, politics must be fairly played to accommodate the verdict of the electorate.

The programmes and manifestoes of each political party and individual candidate canvassing for votes on the platform of such a party must be made known to people which will enable them choose their leaders. Awolowo (1980:182) contends that “for politics to engender national development and integration, the popular misconceptions of religio-political sentiments should be erased”. He further opined that “Politics is essentially materialistic and religion is so fundamentally spiritual”. Therefore it may be difficult for a man to be a successful politician and good Christian or Muslim at the same time (Awolowo 1980:183). In actualizing the integrative effect of man in ensuring national development, Stich (2000:8) advises that “the agencies of politics and religion must work in close and harmonious cooperation”. This is only attainable in a situation where religious and political sentiments cannot be found, that is where politics without bitterness is played.

The definitions of society given by different scholars are both functional and structural. From the functional point of view, society is defined as a complex of groups in reciprocal relationships, interacting upon one another, enabling human organism to carry on their life activities and helping one another to fulfill his wishes and accomplish his interests in association with his fellow man. From the structural point of view, society is the total social heritage of folkways, mores and institutions of habits sentiments and ideals.

Oluniyi (2006) states that; society is a system of usages and procedures of authority and mutual aid of many groupings and divisions and controls over human behaviors and liberties. This ever-changing complex system we call society, is the web of social relationships. Society is the union itself, the organization, the sum of formal relations in which associating individuals are bound together. Society is viewed as a process as well as a structure which are complementary to each other. It exists only where social beings behave towards one another in ways determined by their recognition of one another. Society is conceived as a structure, that is recognizable network of inter-relating institutions. Society is not static and peacefully evolving structure but the tentative solution to the conflicts arising out of antagonistic social relation of production. Social scientists see the society as being made possible by the shared understanding of its members. This implies that the society has been constituted and reconstituted in social interaction.

Negative Effects of Religio-Political Sentiments

Nigeria is a country where three major religions operate. Her religious landscape has been dominated by three major religious groups. They are adherents of traditional religion, Islam and the Christianity. The country has six geo-political zones with domineering religion(s) in each, notably the largely Muslim North and the Christian South. It was later split into the catholic East and the West having the same numerical Strength of Muslims and Christians (Kukah, 2009:15). Politics on the other hand has been characterized by ethnic sentiments. To the extent that ethnic sentiments are fully introduced in virtually all areas of Nigerian political system. Related to ethnic sentiments are sentiments centrally based on relationship, people in friendly relationships irrespective of their religious or ethnic backgrounds, attach it to the political affairs or business of the nation.

Indeed, low productivity and inefficiencies currently experienced in the country can be attributed to Religio-political sentiments. Nigerian society is multi-lingual and multi-ethnic in nature, this has brought a lot of tribal differences which gave room for diverse nature of the Nigerian state. Religio-political sentiments have become a formidable force in the lives of citizens of this noble country called Nigeria. Most often, religio-political sentiments are used in place of merits and skill, this affects the productivity, efficiency and effectiveness of the activities of man thereby pulling down our national development. For instance, in the case of appointment, round pegs are no longer found in round holes.

Religio-political sentiments have been one of the major factors which have seriously dampened the image and glory of the Nigerian society. The imbalance in the literacy rate between various political parties/structures and friendly relationships in Nigerian society has made it impossible to have qualified people in the sensitive government positions. For instance, party/structure or religion A would rather let an ally or associate to the same party who is a teacher e.g Arabic teacher *Alamijiri* to be the minister of education, than allow an ally or associate of an opposition party/structure or even a neutral person who is more qualified to take the position all these are based on relationship hidden under religio-sentiments.

As a result of this, it has accelerated the promotion of incompetent and ineffective civil servants, military, paramilitary officers, thugs, assassination, industrial actions, kidnapping, vote buying, to mention only but a few. Religio-political sentiments create mediocrity, inequality, corruption and lack of transparency. The religio-political sentiment is a very big devastating threat to our national development because it has caused also lost lives and properties, political thugery, unemployment and so on. It has adversely impacted negatively in the Nigerian society because it has led to those in authorities, exploiting the available constitutional provision to their favour in the areas of contract awards, infrastructural development and appointments into strategic government

institutions etc. Such actions create a few rich and powerful individuals, increase poverty and ensures uneven regional development (Larsh and Fredman, 1992:1). This is what the Nigeria society is presently passing through today.

Religio-political sentiments cause more harm than good in the Nigerian society, it is a threat and continue to be a threat to the development of our dear nation. For instance, in the area of privatization and sale of companies and properties, so many states such as Niger, Kogi, Ekiti, Katsina just to mention a few, have been robbed off of the economic benefits which should accrue to their citizens. The privatization exercise appears to have favoured those that have contact with the government in power. Religio-political sentiments have made developments and infrastructural provisions to be loop-sided instead of reflecting equitably round the existing six geo-political zones in the country. This action, instead of promoting unity and national development, it rather threatens it. Religio-political sentiments are of factors that have hampered the demand and desperation for the creation of states and local governments in Nigeria. For example, the Idoma people in Benue state have been struggling for a creation of “Apa State” as a solution to their problem of marginalization (Suberu, 2006). This is also applicable to Enugu State in which they are demanding for “Adada State” this is just two out of many states who calls for liberation out of political neglect and marginalization stoked by religio-political sentiments.

The impact of religio-political sentiments in Nigerian society could also be noticed in the area of the distribution of material resources. For instance, it is the suspicion of Nigerians that because the control of government was so much in the hands of the Muslims, such opportunity was used to allocate much funds to the Muslim dominated Northern parts at the expense of the entire country irrespective of the fact that some mineral resources which are the sources of income to the country are deposited in order parts of the nation. These sentiments have contributed adversely to the fall of our nation’s development.

The justification for this assertion can be observed at the regime of Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, when Ekwunife, (1992: 25) states thus “on January 8, 1986, when the news of the alleged membership of Nigeria in the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) filtered into the ears of Nigerians, voices of dissent have been rife from well – intentioned Nigerian citizens, especially the Christians. Babangida claimed to have taken the decision for economic reasons, so as to be able to access the loans available to OIC member countries. Christians, however, viewed this action as an attempt to Islamize Nigeria (Simon, 2014:2). This was a clear evidence of the negative thinking and accrued actions and reactions emanating from religious sentiment in Nigerian politics. Today, the Nigerian society is being terrorized by an Islamic sect, known as *Boko Haram* insurgency, may be to destroy Christianity and its existence.

Religion and politics have been used to dismantle the development of our nation and her peace. Once you are a Muslim, you cannot accept to choose a non-Muslim to be your leader. If you are a Christian, you will not accept a Muslim as your leader. Religion and politics have been used to undermine the progress and development of this nation, commenting on this, senator BanafemiOjudu points to the fact that because of these two inseparable concepts, Nigeria has become “a field for suicide bombers”. He maintains that “we are becoming another Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, it is bomb blast, tomorrow it is a report on how people are killed in Maiduguri, next tomorrow, It is a bomb factory discovery in Yobe State. Sunny Okosun, a Nigeria musician, composed a song “which way Nigeria?” to suit the condition which the Nigeria economy was, as at that time. This paper also finds out that the lives of Nigerian citizens are being threatened and our national development are already being impaired. This is justifiable with the Muslims call for autonomy, in the face of Nigeria’s tradition. The constitution does not at all elevate any religion, yet this principle was violated when the Muslim governors in the Northern states issued authority to Islamize public life in their domains. In Zamfara State, which was the first state to introduce a strict form of Sharia, the governments claimed that its religions reform was to bring changes and transformation, rather, the reform transformed the public life into Islamic oriented institutions. This state-sponsored Islamization affected non-Muslims as well because they were subjected to some sharia proscriptions, like the ban on alcohol, gender separation in hotels and restaurants, in business and taxis (Mohammed, 2005). All these have adversely hampered and threatened the Nigerian society even in terms of economic development. The national development is threatened because the foreign investors might not be interested to site their industries in a crisis-ridden country.

The tendency of religio-political sentiments activities have made the country more difficult to govern. Religio-political sentiments are potent weapons which invariably makes the development of this nation to be in shambles (Olaleye, 2008). The great harm which religio-political sentiments can inflict on the economy of this nation is total retrogression instead of rapid growth as magnanimous loss of lives are usually experienced (Okoye, 2000). The current insurgency of Boko Haram has metamorphosed to giant destroyers of lives and properties. The fact that Religio-political sentiments hamper the economic development of Nigeria can be illustrated by citing former president Obasanjo, on his resumption of office in 1999, he made it the priority of his government to attract direct foreign investment into the nation’s economy. However at every forum where he tried to woo investors to the country, the issue was a recurrent decimal which is, the international community would not invest in the country as long as violence persistent (Larsh and Fredman, 1992). Another threat which religio-political sentiments had on the economic development of the Nigerian society is the promotion of culture and tradition of

corruption. Virtually, every aspect of the society is corrupt, religion which should be a tool of correction has failed in this regard. Majority of the pastors and Imams have aided and abetted corruption because they have tasked their followers to look for money at all cost to help God and to bring open heavens to their families. The Holy Books (both Bible and Quaran) have not taught them that. The effect of this is because, religious ideals are expected to regulate the political activities.

However, majority of political office holders who would have impacted positively on the national development, given the genuine teachings by their religious leaders have failed to do so because the truth have not been preached. For instance, before the election in 2015, which ushered in President Mohammad Buhari and Prof Yemi Osinbanjo, Prof Yemi Osinbanjo was picked as an active pastor from the Redeemed Christian Church of God. This political engagement is most likely to have affected his pastoral ministry when he would have been introduced to the Cabals and the inner caucus of Nigeria's leadership. As a pastor, he had no positive influences as the vice president and a man of God in the making. Moreover, as a pastor and a Christian he might lose influence on the major decisions of the government his is second in command. From the foregoing, national development is difficult to be attained in the face of all these carnages and killings, these calls for concern to all Nigerians.

Recommendations

- i. Nigeria should adopt religious dialogue in their religious life.
- ii. Religio-political tolerance should be encouraged
- iii. Most programmes of religious and political leaders must always emphasize on the need to embrace peace at all cost.
- iv. In other to achieve this peace, secularism may appear to be the best principle that can uphold peace and harmony.
- v. Religious fanaticism must be de-emphasized in other to pave way for re-designing Nigerian Society.

Conclusion

Religio-political sentiments have impacted negatively on the development of the nation in many ways, be it social, political, economic, religious, bureaucratic and so on. It is a cankerworm which is eating deep in the Nigerian society which requires sincere commitment with sacrifices from all Nigerians. To prefer lasting solutions to this sentiment problem, we should adopt the functional definitions of the society where the Nigerian society is seen as a complex of groups with reciprocal relationships, interacting with one another, enabling them to carry on with their lives activities, helping one another to fulfill their positive wishes and accomplish their fruitful interests in association with their fellow man. The federal government should strongly

discourage the spirit of indigene –settle phenomenon in the country. Just as the federal government is doing currently towards the “Hate Speech” which is the order of the day in Nigerian society, a total discouragement will help citizens to live in peace and harmony. Federal character principle must be strictly implemented both at the zonal, the state and local government levels. Individual relationships should not be given priority against national interest by all and sundry especially the leaders.

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